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ABSTRACT

The communicative approach to second language instruction has gained disproportionate publicity in the language teaching profession through the Communicative Teaching Project in Bangalore, India. Because of a series of articles and books and presentations at conferences advertising the project's alleged innovativeness and effectiveness, it has become an anchor for the advocates of the communicative approach. No attempt has been made to make a truly objective and reliable evaluation of the expensive project, but it has been lent credibility by the prestige of a number of organizations and individuals associated with it. Elsewhere, the technique has not been as successful. Language teaching is suffering from overdependence on theory and inadequate respect for practice, in which eclecticism is more useful than slavish advocacy. (MSE)

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COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING : A CASE OF MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING:

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The idea of the present paper first arose in 1984 when my colleague Prof. R.P.Bhatnagar and I were invited to take part in the RELC Seminar at Singapore. It appears that the organizers thought our title and abstract of the paper too subversive of the theme and thrust of the seminar to be included in its proceedings. It was therefore a matter of great delight to read Michael Swan's two articles entitled ' A Critical look at the Communicative Approach ' in the January and April 1985 numbers of the ELT journal.

Since most people in the ELT profession must have read these articles, no attempt will be made in the present paper to repeat the many arguments presented there, questioning the basic premises on which the communicative approach to language teaching is based. It is, however, necessary to draw attention to the rather cryptic and peevish response to Swan's articles by Widdowson in the July 1985 number of the same journal, under the title, ' Against dogma : A reply to Michael Swan.' The reply does not begin as a reasoned refutation of Swan's arguments but does so on a note that betrays hurt subjectivity :

Michael Swan's two articles are admirably provocative pieces, eloquently written and stimulating to read. This much should be acknowledged. It should be noted, however, that they are not to be read as dispassionate criticism of a careful analytic kind. They are, rather, an indictment, charged with feeling almost as if Swan

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felt that the ideas he opposes were a personal affront. And the desire to have a dig at theorists and to pander to anti-intellectual prejudice at times reduces the discussion to farce. So with reference to their title, these papers are 'critical' only in the sense of being captious : they are not evaluative ...

What an irony that much of the criticism directed against Swan so aptly applies to Widdowson's own rejoinder. Incidentally, it is an interesting piece of discourse to be analysed in terms of its semantic content, rhetorical functions and communicative value !

What is more unfortunate, however, is the fact that Widdowson has chosen to contradict his own sensible views expressed on earlier occasion and the rather inconsistent way he has adopted in expressing himself about the communicative approach. First the self-contradiction :

In April 1973 Widdowson presented a paper at the B.A.A.L. Seminar held at the University of Lancaster. It was called 'Two Types of Communication Exercise'. In it he rightly criticized the inclusion of Wilkins' 'categories of communicative function' in a language syllabus meant for the third world. Talking of the 'notional' or 'communicative' syllabuses he said, ' ... I think we ought to be careful of assuming too readily that syllabuses of this kind are Universally appropriate.' He went on to show how communicative functions are culture-specific and expressed these wise views :

The teaching of communicative functions, then, necessarily involves the teaching of cultural values. This may not pose much of a problem when there is close affinity between the cultures concerned, but difficulties are likely to arise when the values associated with the communicative functions of the language being learned are

remote from those of the learner's own culture ...
How far, then, is a syllabus of this type exportable
outside Europe ?

Widdowson goes on to point out a still more serious difficulty :

The adoption of a notional or communicative syllabus requires the teacher to be familiar with rules of use as well as rules of grammar. But how does he acquire this familiarity ? His own education will have acquainted him with grammatical rules, and these make explicit and as it were, exteriorize his own intuitive knowledge of the system of English and thereby provide in some degree for his ability to teach this system. There are, however, no such explicit stated rules of use to which he can make reference in a similar way.

Conceding that cross-cultural comparisons and grading of the categories of communicative functions is all in the future, he observes :

Meanwhile English teachers have no guidance as to how a notional syllabus is to be interpreted in terms of classroom teaching, and where guidance is necessary I think it would be a mistake to attempt to impose such a syllabus upon them. Let me say again that I am referring to that part of notional syllabuses which has to do with categories of communicative function ... I do not wish to appear reactionary but I believe that we should be wary of recommending radical change. English teaching has suffered badly in the past by imposition of pedagogic dogma : all too often an approach to teaching applicable to one set of circumstances has been given the status of a universal creed. The usual consequence of this has been that teachers have been led to renounce their faith in their own methods in order to embrace principles which they cannot practice.

But this is precisely what Widdowson and some of his compeers are now doing by 'selling' communicative syllabuses and materials specifically produced to teach them.

As for the inconsistent manner Widdowson adopts in relation to the communicative approach, one has to refer to some of his views expressed in a paper presented at a conference on the Teaching of English for Specific Purposes at Paipa, Colombia in April 1977

and later published in the Indian Journal of Applied Linguistics, Volume III, No. 1 of September 1978, and included a year later in his book Explorations in Applied Linguistics, published by the O.U.P. It is entitled 'The Communicative Approach and its Application'. In it at one point he maintains that 'In ESP a communicative approach seems to be the obvious one to adopt because even the most elementary assessment of needs reveals that learners will have to put the language they learn to actual use outside the language teaching context.' But he observes that 'where need specification and examination requirements are not distinct, where language activity is thus confined within the language teaching context, the relevance of a communicative approach is not so obvious.' The paragraph that follows the above observations is significant :

Nor is it obvious how such an approach can be realized as a workable methodology, whether this is designed for ESP or not. The communicative approach is being rapidly adopted, adopted indeed with almost indecent haste, as the new orthodoxy in language teaching : adopted, almost inevitably, without critical examination. It is always easier to join the ranks of the faithful than to question the creed, and as usual the more recent converts are the most zealous and the most embarrassing to the cause.

It is ironic that through his own writings and publications Widdowson has become the High Priest of 'the faithful' and the 'recent converts' whom he decried earlier. Incidentally, what he has said in the above quotation is in essence what Swan says in two of his articles in the ELT journal. To take concert examples of Widdowson's inconsistency, he has authored with J.P.B. Allen the English in - Focus series, for which of course he may be excused since it is ESP, and has acted as Associate Editor of the Reading and Thinking- in English series, which is expressly intended as an EFL course, and

for which he cannot be excused if he meant what he said in the above quotation. It is equally interesting to note that Swan has done to Widdowson and other advocates of the communicative approach nothing different from and worse than what Widdowson has done to Wilkins in the Paipa, Colombia paper of 1977.

We will now talk directly about the communicative approach and what according to us are its shortcomings. The initial impulse that gave rise to the approach was best summed up by Widdowson himself in 1972 :

The problem is that students and especially students in developing countries, who have received several years of formal English teaching, frequently remain deficient in the ability to actually use the language and to understand its use, in normal communication, whether in spoken or written mode.

As a statement of fact or of existential reality the above observations are unexceptionable. What is wrong is the assumption that the sorry state of affairs is caused by a single factor, viz. absence of the communicative approach to learning. Behind it is the implicit understanding that all that was needed to remedy the situation was the introduction or adoption of the communicative approach. Such an understanding is either naive and simplistic or calculated and motivated.

One liberal explanation of the naivete could be the ignorance of the advocates of the communicative approach of the social, economic and educational conditions in the underdeveloped and developing countries of Asia and Africa, in which case what they are saying and doing can be excused to some extent. For, most of these people are given to a sort of 'Eurocentrism' according to which their vision is confined to a somewhat homogeneous cultural background which dictates as much their understanding

of the needs of the learners as the solutions they deem proper to fulfil those needs. A situation where an average class is sixty to eighty strong, where an overwhelming majority of learners are from the economically and culturally weaker or disadvantaged sections of society, where there is little or no motivation to learn a foreign language, where the linguistic and communicative competence of the average teacher is extremely poor, where library facilities are hopelessly inadequate and where a moribund examination system controls and governs all teaching and learning- a situation of the above description is simply inconceivable for these high-brow theorists. For many native speakers of English Asia and Africa still continue to be academic colonies to be civilized by self-professed 'experts' peddling their expensive wares in the third world countries.

The structural revolution was proclaimed with the same fanfare, gusto and contempt for traditional practices. In the process untold wealth was generated by selling millions of copies of a wide variety of textbooks and package courses, all written by native experts. The so-called grammar-translation method was not given a decent burial, for anyone who professed or practised the accursed method was irretrievably damned. The bilingual method was meligned and castigated because it would end the monopoly of the white monolingual as the sole repository of wise language pedagogy. A good account of the profit-motive behind the usual surge of language teaching activity is given by A.P.R. Howatt in his A History of English Language Teaching, published in 1984 by the Oxford University Press. Up to the early years of the seventies the British writing and publishing industry thrived on the rather large national investment in education in the preceding years. But

when the ultimate source of this relative affluence (cheap energy) was abruptly cut off in 1974, it discouraged home-financed activities, but at the same time opened up opportunities in other fields. The appearance of large numbers of overseas students fuelled an expansion of language teaching institutions in Britain itself, as well as hastening the development of English teaching operations in the students' countries of origin. Furthermore, the generally weak pound of 1974-77 attracted customers into expansionist investment policies. While the optimistic project-funding of the earlier period tended to favour home-based language teaching initiatives in, for example, mother-tongue teaching, modern language and the growing field of English as a second language (ESL), the later swing in world economics brought greater benefits to EFL, particularly in the rather expensive market for tailor-made specific purpose courses.

Here it is worth mentioning that a clever smoke-screen has been raised to create an impression as though ESP was organically unrelated to EFL. It is EFL put in a glittering garb and couched in a fancy title. The profitability of ESP courses based on the communicative approach is, therefore, absolutely at the cost of the learners of English as a foreign language. Furthermore, every attempt is made by the propagandists on behalf of the communicative approach to conceal any evidence likely to prove subversive of that approach. Thus very little or no mention is ever made of the Swedish GUME Project which compared the learning of grammar by direct method (an intrinsic part of the Communicative Approach) and by traditional ones and whose results favoured the latter. In fact one of the crucial factors in successful language teaching is the teacher's mastery as much of the learners' mother tongue as that of the foreign language. Errors of the interlanguage can often be traced to the influence of the mother tongue and a contrastive study of the mother tongue and the foreign language can be a rich source of insights useful for curriculum design, materials production and remedial teaching. The communicative approach based on English - only

insistence becomes thoroughly disqualified for EFL purposes.

The communicative approach has gained disproportionate publicity through a calculated exercise in salesmanship carried out in Bangalore, India under the name of Communicational Teaching Project (CTP). The project started in 1979 under the directorship of Dr. N.S.Prabhu, an official of the British Council in Madras. From the way the Project and its alleged innovativeness and effectiveness have been advertised in articles and books and at seminars and workshop it appears that it has become the sheet anchor of the advocates of the communicative approach. No attempt has been made to make a truly objective and dependable evaluative study of the expensive project. The prestige of the British Council and of some of the better-known EFL activists and writers like C.J.Brumfit has been staked as a back-up manoeuvre to lend the CTP the status of a pace-setter in the field of communicative teaching of English. But the well orchestrated euphoria about the CTP notwithstanding, the best that has so far been established about it is the following conclusion arrived at by Alan Beretta and Alan Davies in their 'Evaluation of the Bangalore Project' published in the April 1985 issue of the ELT journal, the same in which the second and the concluding article by Swan is published. Part of the conclusion reads as follows :

From the beginning, it was our view that the results of the evaluation might constitute a 'probe' of the central CTP hypothesis, but not 'proof'. The impossibility of full experimental control, and the potential for bias in test construction make generalization impossible. Also, the fact that no group of learners has been exposed to the CTP treatment for more than three years precludes any firm statement about the effectiveness of this method at later stages of learning

If all the 'ifs' and 'buts' are taken together and read in the light of the inherent limitations of any reliable evaluation as pointed out in the extract quoted above, all that remains of the CTP is a mere whimper, quite disproportionate to the noises made about its success in international conferences and journals. One aspect deserving of our serious attention, and arising out of the CTP, is the insidious practice of having 'client experts' in developing countries to mouth propaganda on behalf of the professional overseas masters. The practice is undoubtedly a double blessing. It furthers the interests of the masters by giving them extensive markets for selling their wares and it also brings untold patronage and rich rewards to the client spokesmen.

I would like to conclude this paper by once again making it clear that the observations have been made in the context of English as a foreign language (and I have maintained that ESP- and for that matter also EST and EAP - is yet another branch of EFL). Widely felt dissatisfaction with results based on current practices leads some people to a search for alternatives. Nothing bad or surprising about that. But replacement can be justified only when poor results can be indisputably ascribed on the faulty or inadequate nature of the item sought to be replaced. It is totally unjustified if the fault lies in those who use the item or in circumstances under which it is used. Language teaching has suffered not for lack of theory or as a result of defective theory. It has slumped on account of too much dependence on theory and too little respect for practice. Language pedagogy can come its own if it once again learns to respect and follow the successful practitioner who is always committed to eclecticism.

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